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2021

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Weckström , E , Lastikka , A-L , Karlsson , L & Pöllänen , S 2021 , ' Enhancing a Culture of Participation in Early Childhood Education and Care through Narrative Activities and Project-based Practices ' , Journal of Early Childhood Education Research , vol. 10 , no. 1 , pp. 6-32 . <

<https://jecer.org/enhancing-a-culture-of-participation-in-early-childhood-education-and-care-through-narrative-activities>  
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# Enhancing a culture of participation in early childhood education and care through narrative activities and project-based practices

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**ABSTRACT:** In early childhood education and care (ECEC), there is a need for research to develop practices planned, implemented and evaluated in shared activities between educators and children. The objective of this qualitative study is to explore how narrative activities and project-based practices in an ECEC centre promote the development of a culture of participation, which supports reciprocal and listening practices emerging from children's initiatives and interests. This will be done through studying what phases are experienced based on the projects planned, implemented and evaluated together by the children and educators becoming part of the pedagogical activities. The theoretical framework for this study lies in the sociocultural paradigm. The research data consist of four pedagogical projects. Narrative activities and methods were used in projects when collecting and analysing research data. The results of this study show that there are five phases of shared activities between children and educators: (1) Initial idea, (2) Storycrafting, (3) Narrative play, (4) Closing ceremony, and (5) Recalling sessions. This study contributes to the development of ECEC pedagogy which promotes children's initiatives and interests, as well as strengthens children's sense of participation.

**Keywords:** *culture of participation, child's perspective, narrative activities, project-based practices*

## Introduction

The traditional view of a child as a gradually developing future member of a society has transformed (Alanen, 2001; Lipponen et al., 2018; Prout, 2011): particularly the current Nordic discourses in childhood see children as participatory and equal agents in a society, who are able to bring forward their interests and ideas (Sommer, 2019; United Nations [UN], 1989). This change to the sociocultural paradigm can clearly be seen in early childhood education and care (ECEC) research (Lipponen et al., 2018). When childhood is considered through a sociocultural paradigm, it is possible to create knowledge that is formed in interaction between individuals (Cole, 1996; Karlsson, 2020). Through this paradigm, children are competent actors and active agents, who construct their development path through shaping, creating, sharing, and reproducing their activities (Corsaro, 2011; Kronqvist & Kumpulainen, 2011). It is an epistemological choice concerned with the questions of what kind of and whose knowledge is regarded as valuable (Chimirri, 2019; Poikolainen, 2014). This means that it is relevant to see children as independent individuals, but still as members of a group in those cultural and political arenas which construct childhood (James, 2007; Jenkins, 2006). Furthermore, it is crucial to regard a child's perspective as central in ensuring that ECEC pedagogy is empowering, appealing, relevant and challenging for all children (Dunphy, 2012; de Sousa et al., 2019).

Research on quality of ECEC shows that it is essential for children's learning and experiences that teachers support and monitor children's initiatives and observations (Os & Hernes, 2019), as well as promote reciprocal and equal interaction between children and educators (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). In Finland, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) has published guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of ECEC (Vlasov et al., 2019). Process-related factors (e.g. interaction in relationships) are defined as the core functions of ECEC and ECEC centres' pedagogical culture, which both are directly linked to the child's experiences (Vlasov et al., 2019). Thus, the process-related factors become apparent in daily encounters including pedagogical activities and the ways they are led, planned, implemented, evaluated and developed according to targets specified in the Finnish curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2018). In Finland, children's participation in ECEC is steered by the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) and the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (EDUFI, 2018). The new binding regulations require that educators develop their working methods in order to include children's initiatives and interests, as well as to plan, implement and evaluate activities together with children.

However, in Finnish ECEC, there are no clear structures or practises for strengthening children's participation and agency (Kangas et al., 2016; Virkki, 2015). Although our earlier research (Weckström et al., 2020) clearly implies that an ECEC centre act as a shared place for children and educators where the everyday routines and activities are established in shared meanings, experiences and well-planned pedagogical activities, they have traditionally been adult-built settings in which children have marginal opportunities to influence their activities (Köngäs, 2018; Punch, 2002). The nature of childhood in adult society means that children are accustomed to gaining the favour of educators, and they may fear educators' reactions to what they say (Fredriksen, 2010; Punch, 2002). Therefore, children start to create their own subculture, which excludes educators (Corsaro, 2011; Köngäs, 2018). An educator can never be a plenipotentiary member of the children's community and totally understand the world from a child's point of view (Fredriksen, 2010; Punch, 2002). Therefore, it is important that educators are aware of this and acknowledge it (Freire, 2018). Roos (2015) argues that children are living in two different cultures in an ECEC centre: the peer culture with other children and the other culture organised by educators. Thus, in order an ECEC centre can act as a shared place for children and educators it is necessary to enable a reciprocal and listening culture of participation, where both children and educators are active agents and have an effect on shared activities (see also Juutinen, 2015; Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019).

This study is part of a larger participatory research effort focusing on exploring the development of a culture of participation in an ECEC centre. In previous phases of this research project, educators were reflecting the change of a culture of participation and the elements required for the change (see Karlsson et al., 2018; Weckström et al., 2017; Weckström et al., 2020). The general objective of this paper is to explore how narrative activities and project-based practices promote the development of a culture of participation, which supports reciprocal and listening practices emerging from children's initiatives and interests. This will be done through studying what kind of phases are gone through based on the four pedagogical projects planned, implemented and evaluated together by the children and educators in the ECEC setting.

## **Culture of participation**

In ECEC, a culture of participation highlights relationships between educators and children who must have the opportunity to influence the community and sense of belonging to a group (Jenkins, 2009; Kirby et al., 2003; Weckström et al., 2017). From the child's perspective, a culture of participation in ECEC is significant because participation

is connected with the sense of belonging to the community, being accepted, children's wellbeing and being part of democracy (Juutinen, 2015; Leinonen & Venninen, 2012; Theobald & Kultti, 2012). A culture of participation and a child's perspective activity combine into a relational community-based approach in which all actors play a role in shaping community activities and knowledge (Kirby et al., 2003; Schoenmakers, 2015). Activities and knowledge are related to the place, time, and to other actors (Karlsson, 2020). According to previous research, educators have a powerful role as gatekeepers of participation in promoting or hindering children's opportunities to have an influence on activities (Roos, 2015; Sairanen et al., 2020; Weckström et al. 2017).

There has been criticism towards children's participation: it has been brought forward that through participation children will be in charge of the issues they do not necessarily comprehend (James, 2007; Valentine, 2011). On the other hand, extreme protection may prevent children from determining issues concerning themselves. In a culture of participation, it is crucial that educators do not give all the responsibility to children. For children, the most important issue is not getting their own way: being heard, voicing their views, and receiving support are significant in increasing sense of participation (Thomas, 2007; see also Jenkins, 2009). Hence, a culture of participation is not technical and does not transfer the power in linear from educators to children. It is more a phenomenon created in the interaction between educators and children (Jenkins, 2009). Children's initiatives and interests, as well as children's and educators' shared understanding, have a crucial role (Kangas & Lastikka, 2019; Kangas et al., 2016). Not everyone needs to be actively involved in joint activities all the time, but it must be taken into account that everyone feels that they have the opportunity to do so (Jenkins, 2009).

In our previous study (Weckström et al., 2020), we have found that in order to realise a culture of participation, educators require a deep understanding of participation. The following elements must be realised in the whole community, so that a culture of participation can become a permanent way of working in ECEC: (1) a shared understanding of the image of an active child, (2) a shared understanding of communal professional development, (3) reciprocal and pedagogical leadership, and (4) a shared we-narrative enabling the comprehensive understanding, promotion and maintenance of a culture of participation. Without the we-narrative the promotion of a culture of participation concerning the whole ECEC centre is not successful (Weckström et al., 2020; see also Kirby et al., 2003; Puroila & Haho, 2017; Uhl-Bien, 2011). Successful implementation of a culture of participation requires educators to deeply understand a culture of participation (Kirby et al., 2003) and it must be based on appropriate and well-established structures and practices that support participation (Sargeant, 2018). In this

study, we examine a culture of participation particularly through narrative activities and project-based practices. Narratives create space for examining and redefining the power relationship between children and educators (Kirby & Bryson, 2002; Rinaldi, 2001). Project-based practices have proven to be a natural way to promote children's initiatives and interests in a way that children also have the opportunity to influence the course and outcomes of activities (Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Sargent, 2011).

## **Narrative activities and Storycrafting method**

Narrative activities offer concrete tools to take into account children's initiatives and to plan shared activities (Clark & Statham, 2005; Lastikka & Karlsson, in press; Merjovaara et al., 2020). Bruner (1991) talks about narrative knowledge; knowledge is in a narrative form and requires special sensitivity to understand what one has heard. Instead of educators assuming they know what children are interested in, through children's narratives and stories it is possible to receive information on children's interests and motives, thinking and understanding of different issues. In order to understand and become part of children's own culture, educators need to understand children's independent and different ways of telling about and expressing themselves (Bruner, 1991). Children's narratives should be seen as holistic, interactive, bodily and multisensory processes (Puroila et al., 2012). Narratives and listening are intertwined when listening requires strong sensitivity to become reciprocal (Puroila & Estola, 2012; Puroila et al., 2012).

An ECEC centre can be seen as a narrative environment, where children and educators act in close relationships (see Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). According to Freire (2018), dialogue involves encounters between people aiming for shared learning and action. Dialogue is a key part of a culture of participation and its prevalent communality. In order to give importance to children's stories, stories need to be formed, told and heard (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Listening to young children is viewed as part of a culture of participation in which educators' and children's perspectives are recognised and debated (Kirby & Bryson, 2002; Rinaldi, 2001). According to Clark (2005), listening is an active process of communication involving hearing, interpreting and constructing meanings. It is not limited to the spoken word (Fredriksen, 2010), but is a necessary stage in participation in daily routines as well as in wider decision-making processes. It is also important to take into account interaction, expressions and articulation, which are more difficult to perceive (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

There is a range of techniques for listening to young children, which shift the balance away from the written or spoken word to visual or multisensory approaches. Drawing, photographing, Storycrafting (see Karlsson, 2013) and other art and craft activities have been used as another avenue for young children to express their views and experiences (Clark, 2005; Pöllänen, 2011). Listening to children and talking about their own photographs or drawings can reveal important insights into their understanding, and discussion of their drawings involves a deeper analysis and reveals further insights (Cook & Hess, 2007; Honkanen et al., 2018). In this study, we utilise particularly the Storycrafting method, because it is already familiar to all of the authors (see Shenton, 2004). Previous research has shown that it is possible to promote more equal and reciprocal interaction between children and educators through Storycrafting (Lastikka & Karlsson, in press). In Storycrafting, the educators position themselves as active listeners (Karlsson, 2013) meaning that Storycrafting is always based on a dialogue, interaction and willingness of the educator to listen to the child and willingness of the child to tell a story. The Storycrafting process includes five phases: telling, writing, reading aloud, correcting the story if the child desires, and reading the story aloud to other listeners or publishing. At each stage, the story is created in a new, communal way between the narrator and the writer. In addition, at each stage, the participants' experiences of sharing and participating together is essential (Karlsson, 2013). When Storycrafting is used in ECEC, the activity starts with the following Storycrafting instruction (Karlsson, 2013; Riihelä, 1991) by the educator:

*Please tell a story that you would like to tell.  
I will write it down, just as you tell it.  
When the story is finished, I will read it aloud.  
At that point, you can correct the story or make changes, if you wish.*

The method allows educators to focus on listening actively to children's own thoughts, interests and ideas instead of merely evaluation or corrections. Stories are written down as the child wants (Karlsson, 2013). In Storycrafting, narrators (children) decide what they want to tell about, and educators write everything down word-for-word.

## **Project-based practices**

In project-based practices, learning is seen as a process of creative inquiry and the duties of educators are not to give answers but to facilitate the learning process, listening, researching and learning, together with the children (Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Rinaldi, 2006). Through project-based practices educators can implement pedagogy in which children's initiatives and opportunities to influence planning, implementation and



evaluation are valued (Fredriksen, 2010; Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2003; Waller & Bitou, 2011). Children are more involved if their activities are meaningful and based on their initiatives and interests (Kangas & Lastikka, 2019; Krauss & Boss, 2013, Merjovaara et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, it has been found that educators attach great importance to listening to children, but in practice children's chances of participating in decision-making, pedagogical processes and planning and directing their own learning are limited (Kangas, 2016; Kirby, 2020). Moreover, educators feel that planning is easier without children's involvement and freedom to influence the structure of the day (Virkki, 2015). Although, educators are required to have physical and emotional proximity with children (Katsiada, 2018; Singer et al., 2013; Weckström et al., 2017). As a whole, the issue at stake is a change from the pedagogical model that underlies educators' behaviour: from an individualistic caring-controlling model to a group dynamic-facilitating model (Singer et al., 2013).

In project-based practices pedagogical documentation enhance children's sense of participation (Alasuutari et al., 2014; Knauf, 2017; Rintakorpi & Reunamo, 2017). Pedagogical documentation can be defined as all documentation that has pedagogy as its focus (Alcock, 2000) requiring that the (child-centred) content, observations and documentation, are included in the development of an operational culture, either individually or collectively (Mansikka, 2019). Pedagogical documentation, such as photographs, stories, videos and diaries, helps in making visible for children, educators, and families what is going on, what has happened, and what is done during the pedagogical project. Pedagogical documentation also helps to observe what has been learned during the project. Furthermore, the evaluation of activities, learning targets (both of individuals and groups) and setting new pedagogical objectives, is enabled through pedagogical documentation. The lack of general recognition of pedagogical documentation in the ECEC has led to its limited use and excluding children from the documentation process (Elfström Pettersson 2015; Knauf, 2017; Rintakorpi & Reunamo, 2017).

## Methods

Thereby, the aim of this study is to explore how narrative activities and project-based practices promote the development of a culture of participation, which supports reciprocal and listening practices emerging from children's initiatives and interests. As typical to participatory research, educators and children were participating as co-



researchers in planning, producing and analysing the research data through multimethods in order to achieve a deeper and broader perspective of the research phenomenon (see Bergold & Thomas, 2012; James et al., 2008). In the following example, we describe how the research project started in the fall of 2016 with 5-6 –year-old children:

*I (researcher) told the children about my work as a researcher that I am interested to tell other people what it is like to be in the ECEC centre. I asked the children who they thought had information about the life in the ECEC centre. "Adults do", Joona replied. After continuing the discussion, the children also suggested that I know and their parents as well. Veera said that parents know what they are being told. They are not in the ECEC centre. So we continued our reflections. Finally, I asked if there would still be someone who is a part of the everyday life of the ECEC centre. "Well, we children are", Valtteri realised. "Yes, we have", everyone replied. I said: "I agree. I think you know perfectly well about the life in the ECEC centre. You know so much that I would need their help in doing the research."*

(Research diary, September 2016)

## Participants and Data

The context of this qualitative research was a private newly established ECEC centre in Finland. The centre was selected as a case study by purposeful intensity sampling (Patton, 1990), because the leader of the ECEC centre and all educators were interested in starting a participatory research project in order to promote a culture of participation. The research was conducted during two and half years (2015–2017). The research participants were 41 children (aged 3 to 7 years) and three educators (two ECEC teachers and one ECEC nurse). All the names of the participants have been altered for confidentiality. One of the teachers worked simultaneously as a researcher and a leader of the ECEC centre.

In this study, the research data consist of the narratives of four pedagogical projects, which are introduced in detail in Table 1.

TABLE 1 The four pedagogical projects implemented with children

PROJECT	TIME	PARTICIPANTS	THE MATERIALS OF THE NARRATIVES
Black Pearl	August–October 2015	14 (aged 4 to 6 years) children and two educators, Anu and Ulla	Storycrafted stories about Black Pearl (N=3) Videotaped shadow theatre performance (N=1) Mind-map (N=1) Plans to build spaceships (N=9) Photographs (N=44) Memo of the conversation (N=1) Educators' planning conversation (N=1)
Golden Sword	March–May 2016	17 (aged 5 to 7 years) children and two educators, Anu and Ulla	Children's logbooks (N=17) Videos of the launch of the project (N=3) Drawings of the characters (N=10) Photographs of the painted characters (N=6) The designing of swords (N=7) Photographs and storycrafted stories of lighthouses (N=4) The diary of Sylvi (the boat dog) (N=1) Memories from the treasure island (storycrafted stories and drawings, N=13) The words of the rap song (N=1) Photographs (N=59)
Maps	September–October 2016	8 (aged 3 to 4 years) children and three educators, Hanna, Anu and Ulla	Photographs of the children's maps (N=12) Videos of the activities (N=5) Educators' planning conversation (N=1) Hanna's diary (N=1)
The Ship Pansy	January–May 2017	24 (aged 3 to 5 years) children and one educator, Anu	Storycrafted group story (N=1) Anu's diary (N=1) Memo of the conversation (N=1)

Pedagogical projects were started based on educators' observations on children's initiatives, stories and interests, which then led the projects forward. For example, at the beginning of the Black Pearl project, children wondered what the Black Pearl could be. The children said the following:

Aaron: *I might be searching it in the forest.*

Veera: *If we need to go up. Maybe we should look whether there's something interesting above.*

Jaakko: *To go to space with a rocket.*

Veera: *If it could be Captain Hook's sister's black pearl. And Captain Hook needs help.*

Artturi: *Let's hide the black pearl somewhere. The Black Pearl is flying from space. It has fallen on the ground from space.*

Viola: *It could be (hidden) in necklaces and earrings. Like in your necklace (points to the researcher's necklace).*

All the activities in the projects involved children and educators planning, implementing and evaluating together. In the projects, the comprehensive growth, development and learning of each child were taken into account, and the activities were planned and carried out through the different narrative and participatory enhancing activities, such as narrative playing, Storycrafting, drawing, video recording, photographing, performing arts and craft indoors and outdoors. These diverse narrative methods and environments offered children a natural way to narrate and express themselves (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). In the projects, educators combined activities based on children's initiatives, spontaneous and supported play, the objectives of ECEC for an individual child and a child group. Implementing pedagogical projects in the above-described way required that educators understood the significance of a culture of participation in everyday life in ECEC. During the pedagogical projects, educators discussed the documentation and experiences in order to identify children's interests and potential for learning.

### **Ethics and researcher's position**

This study was guided by viewing children as having rights and capable of being part of planning and shaping their own environment (Corsaro, 2011; Kronqvist & Kumpulainen, 2011). We followed the principle that the aim of producing research data did not exclusively focus on collecting data but on encouraging educators to listen to children, as well as offer opportunities for children to participate and have influence (James et al., 2008; Lastikka & Kangas, 2017). Because researcher worked as the leader and an educator in the child group, her role was not to act as a traditionally director. Typical to relational orientation, her leadership was built in process together with all members in the work community, children and parents (see Granrusten, 2020; Uhl-Bien, 2011). However, she was continuously aware of her role as a teacher, a leader and a researcher and the resulting limitations (Xerri, 2018). It was her responsibility to be trustworthy and to act in a way that respects all participants throughout the research process (Olli, 2019).

An ethical review was not required; however, this study has complied with the guidelines of ethical research of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2019). The informed consent was authorised by the legal provider of the ECEC centre and municipality as well as from the educators and guardians. The children's consent was confirmed in the research situations by telling and reminding each child about the research and asking them whether their output can be saved as part of the research material. The projects were implemented as part of the everyday activities in the ECEC centre in order to minimise the inconvenience of the data collection. It was important to inform all members of the community which situations were included in the study. Both

children and educators were able to refuse being co-researchers; there were some stories and drawings that some of the children did not want to be part of this research. Additionally, the fact that the researcher was one of the educators and known by the children beforehand made co-researching with the children productive. Good co-operation was helped by the researcher's understanding of children (see Graue & Walsh, 1998, Olli, 2019). In this research, knowledge of the educational perspectives helped the study of everyday life in an ECEC centre in a unique way. The knowledge of the local culture helped provide an understanding of the elements of status and control influencing the activities of educators and children (see Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

To enhance the rigour of this qualitative study, we had to take into account the trustworthiness (see Krefting, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We accounted for credibility and confirmability by identifying the narratives of the pedagogical projects. In the analysis, we certified dependability by verifying the steps of the research. Transferability can be evaluated from the rich data and dense description (see also Polit & Beck, 2010).

## Analysis

In the analysis, the first author of this paper, together with two other educators, gathered a narrative of each pedagogical project by using all the material generated during the project and describing the progress of the projects as accurately as possible. All the material was gathered and discussed including how the project had started, what phases were involved in the project, what kind of material had been created during the project, what ideas had been shared by children and educators and what kind of insights had emerged among the educators. All four narratives of the pedagogical projects were analysed through narrative analysis by analysing the contents and interaction of narratives, and the context in which the narratives arose (see Gubrium & Holstein, 2008). The narrative analysis was conducted together with the researcher and educators by reading the narratives and discussing and writing about the observations related to the narratives, as well as exploring the differences and similarities revealed in the narratives. The children participated in writing and analysing the narratives of two projects (the Black Pearl project and the Golden Sword project) recalling what had been done during the projects and outlining the different stages of the projects. The first version of the results was developed based on the children's analysis together with the researcher.

In this research, the abductive approach was applied in the analysis of the data. While the abductive approach (Patton, 2015; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) starts from empiria, it does not reject the existence of the theory behind everything. In this study, all the researchers were well acquainted with participation and related theories as well as co-

researching. However, the research questions for this study were formed on the basis of a review of the data. Furthermore, the knowledge of the ECEC context was also integrated into the interpretation of the data. Abduction can be seen as the systematised creativity or intuition in research to develop “new” knowledge (Andreewsky & Bourcier, 2000). There was a constant movement between theory and empirical data. The connection of a culture of participation to the relational approach was formed only after reviewing the data in the analysis phase. All narratives from the pedagogical projects repeated almost the same structure, where planning, implementation, and evaluation followed each other. This analysis allowed us to answer the research question of this study: What kinds of phases are gone through based on the projects planned, implemented and evaluated by children and educators together to become part of pedagogical activities?

## Results

Through our analysis, we found the following phases (Figure 1) showing how the planning, implementation and evaluation of the shared narrative activities of children and educators supporting a culture of participation is proceeding in a process utilising the following narrative activities: (1) Initial ideas, (2) Storycrafting, (3) Narrative play, (4) Closing ceremony, and (5) Recalling sessions. The analysis shows that the phases are not separate, and a project is not always straightforward; particularly the phases of Storycrafting and Narrative play occur several times during the project.

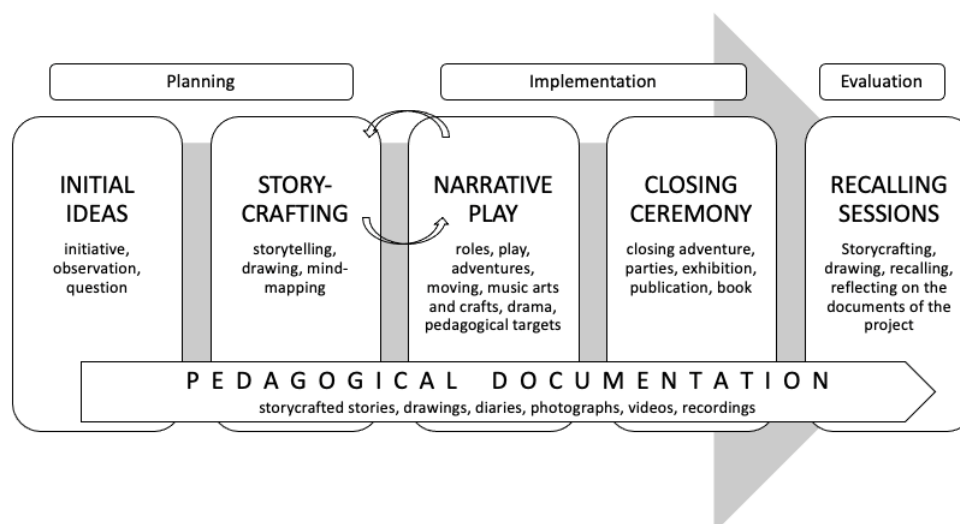


FIGURE 1 The phases of narrative activities in children's and educators' project-based practices

## The initial ideas

According to our data, the initial idea for a pedagogical project can be from a single child, several children or an educator. An idea may arise from a child's initiative, a child's or an educator's observation or an asked question. There can also be several initial ideas, and they can be linked to the project at various phases. The beginning of the project, children can be slightly timid to bring forward their thoughts if they are not familiar with project-based practices. However, when realising that through telling stories and ideas they have an influence on activities, they become free to tell about their perceptions more freely. A key element in the initial idea is that it corresponds to the interests of children, as in the following excerpts about the launch of the Ship Pansy and Black Pearl projects:

*Children's role plays had been related to a ship and the sea during the last fall. This gave birth to the idea of the project for next spring.*

(Narrative of the Ship Pansy project)

*We were making papier-mâché. Suddenly Veera (child) found a bottle with a message. The paper contained only the text 'Black Pearl'. The children were first preoccupied, but when Anu (educator) asked what the message might mean, the children became enthusiastic to reflect on the issue. Anu started to write down the children's conversations so that as many ideas as possible were remembered. These children's ideas were the starting point of the whole project and the shared activities of the children and the educators was tied to the story of the Black Pearl. Narratively, the Black Pearl project was experienced on three different levels all the time, because the children initiated three simultaneous stories: The Black Pearl became 'Captain Black Beard's sister,' 'The missing piece of jewellery', 'The stone dropped from space'.*

(Narrative of the Black Pearl project)

For children, the start of a new project signalled of a pleasant activity or an exciting adventure where anything was possible. As typical to project-based practices, the outcome of the project was not known to anyone in advance. Taking into account the initiatives, expressions and gestures of the children in the shared discussions strengthened the building of a common understanding. Because the atmosphere was supportive and accepting, children felt that they were able to ask questions about new things, wonder, try, and learn about them. That's when the initial ideas became a natural continuum as new narratives.

## Storycrafting

Our data showed that Storycrafting is a key part of the planning. Joint planning in a group ensures that children's ideas, initiatives and interests are also visible in project activities. In planning, educators used varied narrative activities to enable all children to participate in the design in a way that suited them appropriately. Expressing ideas and initiatives was not based solely on speech: it was important for educators to know the children well, use alternative means of communication and observe children's play.

It was found to be significant that the educators would announce whose ideas, initiatives, and interests were being used at a given time. In this way, educators helped children to realise that the initiatives and interests of all members of the group are relevant to the group's activities. For example, in the Map Project, the maps made by the children were visible to everyone on the wall and once the child's map was put into action, the child was allowed to take his or her map home. That way the children knew whose maps had yet to be implemented.

The good imagination of the children and their different ways of thinking, compared to the thinking of an educator, became apparent in the analysis: especially in the younger children's group, children's ideas, stories and storycrafted stories were partially linked to the theme of the ongoing project, but the children told about their other interests via their small stories linked to the theme of the project. For example, in the Ship Pansy project, policemen were having adventures; in the Map project, there were narrative plays where zombies and firemen were involved. In contrast, in the Black Pearl and Golden Sword projects, children's narratives were fairly closely related to pirate subjects, although the Black Pearl also involved a space theme based on the children's initiative.

The analysis revealed that Storycrafting did not end after the planning of the activities but takes place in terms of implementation and evaluation. From a child's point of view, it was important that Storycrafting was associated with all of the above-mentioned phases, because then children's typical narratives and potentially altered or refined ideas are visible during all the phases of the project, and new ideas can also be implemented immediately. It enabled children's planning in the real part of the project and is not just on the level of ideas and enabled changing and developing the project at different phases. The following excerpt shows how Storycrafting was used in the planning process of the Ship Pansy project:

*The Ship Pansy project started by Storycrafting. Anu (educator) said to the children, "Once upon a time there was a ship ...". The children immediately seized the idea and*



*came up with the main characters on board. They also explained what the characters looked like, how the ship looks, what's to be eaten, what kind of sport exercises and games are played, and where the characters sleep, what they do on the ship, etc. Anu just wrote everything down exactly with the phrases the children used. One of the children came up with the name for the ship.*

(Narrative of the Ship Pansy project)

The Ship Pansy project showed the educator that a new storycrafted story could not be made immediately after reading the story on the previous day. Children needed play and activities between Storycrafting. After that, the children had new ideas for the story and then the story and the activities proceeded. In our research, children's narratives reminded us of the construction of play, related interaction and quick association (see also Riihelä, 2012).

### **Narrative play**

The results of this study show that at the implementation phase, the joint activities of children and educators are crucial. Play was a key part of activities, and as educators wanted to better understand the thoughts and issues of children and the relationships between children, they were also actively participating and involved in play. Realising this stage required motivation from educators but throwing themselves into children's ideas for activities also brought joy to educators. Contents and implementation methods came both from children and educators. It was found that educators saw an interesting challenge in keeping up with the fast-paced nature of children's narratives and to work these out in pedagogical projects. Narrative play appeared in the Map project as follows:

*The children immediately came up with the idea that pirates had treasure maps and that they can climb, find treasures, etc. On the basis of these, Hanna (educator) began to think about the future. Of course, we made treasure maps right away! Then it came to mind that we will use the children's treasure maps during the fall in order to find clues and tasks that will then teach all kinds of things. The treasure maps were really a great thing and the children have experienced "star moments" with their own treasure maps, because we used only one map per day and the map of the child in question, and he/she could be the leader during that time.*

(Narrative of the Map project)

In the planning phase, the educators and the children also set pedagogical targets for the project. Pedagogical goals were shaped according to the objectives defined in the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) and in the Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (EDUFI, 2018), as well as by the goals of the growth,

development and learning of an individual child set out in the child's individual ECEC plan (EDUFI, 2018). The educators wrote down the objectives and plans set for the pedagogical activities on paper, which was easy to use during projects and ensuring that the objectives were achieved. It was found that in project-based practices, it was also important to set goals for group activities. With the children, objectives were set especially for the emotional, social and play skills. These were discussed both with the children in the morning circle and among the educators during the planning time. The analysis revealed that it was possible to connect the pedagogical targets with the narrative play created together by the children and educators. In the projects Ship Pansy and Golden Sword, this was shown in the following ways:

*Because in the Ship Pansy project there were robbers throwing meatballs, Anu (educator) grasped the children's idea and addressed various food education themes in this context.*

(Narrative of the Ship Pansy Project)

*At the beginning of the project, we all came up with our own character. Anu (educator) was a cook and Ulla (educator) was a boatswain. The children were pirates, ship cats, mermaids, captains and ship dogs. When we landed in the harbour, we together built a narrative play environment in the ECEC centre, where we had a library, a candy store and a circus. Everyone was able to visit different places in the harbour to learn for example mathematical and social skills and performing.*

(Narrative of the Golden Sword project)

## **Closing ceremony**

As typical of pedagogical projects, it was found to be crucial that the projects culminated in some way in the end. Our analysis shows that children enjoyed ending the project, because it involved an adventure, celebration, exhibition or publication related to the theme of the project. For example, in The Golden Sword project, the joy of the children was evident when the soft toy ship dog Sylvi, who visited the children's homes during the project, turned into a real puppy at the end of the project. The real Sylvi also visited the ECEC centre and came to a forest trip with children.

The initiative for ending the project came from educators as they noticed that a problem had been solved or children were not interested in the topic anymore. It was found that educators wanted to finish the pedagogical project together with children, because that way they were able to support children's perseverance and continuity of activity. In the Black Pearl project, the closing ceremony appeared in the following way:

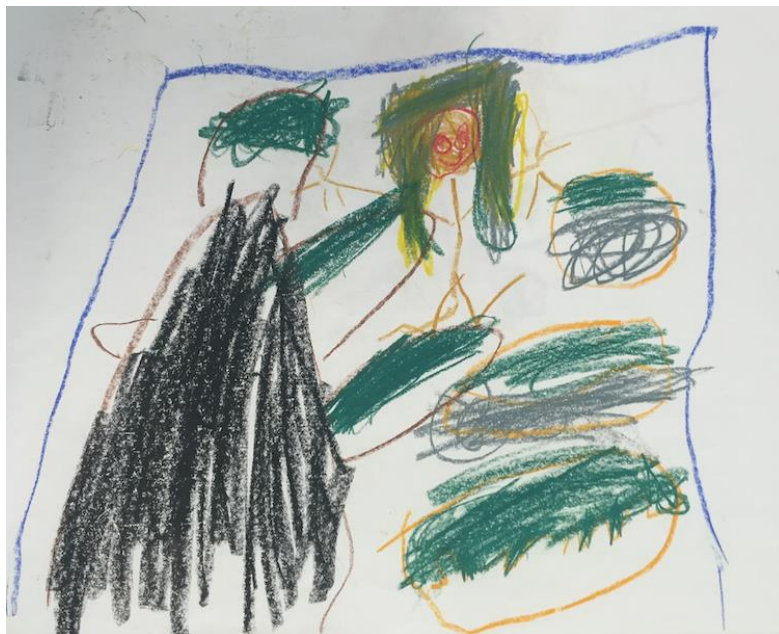
*The conversation was long and meandering, but unanimously the story went so that Ulla (educator) had to retrieve the message from a Single-eyed Fox on the same night at the university and had to watch out for the Spy Crow trying to prevent the Single-eyed Fox's attempt to help. With the message, we can find a pearl and then we will build a cardboard spaceship to go to space to take the pearl and girl back.*

(Narrative of the Black Pearl project)

## Recalling sessions

According to our results, project evaluation as a whole is usually done with children and educators by discussing and remembering the activities and the pedagogical documentation in the recalling sessions. A wide range of emotions were also shared during the pedagogical projects, so it was important to address them together at the end of the project. Documentation, such as storycrafted stories, diaries, drawings, photographs, recordings, or video clips, allowed children and educators to return to the emotions and things learned, and to plan new activities. Through recalling sessions, it was possible to see that activities occurred both in indoor and outdoor learning environments.

In the following picture (Picture 1), 5-year-old Alma recalls an excursion during the Golden Sword project in which she had the courage to climb on a high cliff. Alma said, "*I liked climbing there on the rock. There I am, and the Rock.* "



PICTURE 1 Alma and the rock (4.5.2016)

Evaluation, as well as planning, took place at various phases of the pedagogical project. Projects included many different features, some of which led to longer-lasting activities than others. It was found that when children's and educators' relationships were trustful and children felt that they had the opportunity to influence, they also told educators if they were not interested in something or did not want to be involved in doing something. Similarly, they talked about their preferences at different phases of activities, so even from this point of view, evaluation can be seen happening all the time.

## Discussion

In this paper, the objective was to study how narrative activities and project-based practices promote the development of a culture of participation. This was done by studying what phases are gone through based on projects planned, implemented and evaluated together by the children and educators. Based on our research data, we found the following phases: (1) Initial idea, (2) Storycrafting, (3) Narrative play, (4) Closing ceremony, and (5) Recalling sessions. Detection of these phases supports the children's opportunities to be part of and bring forward their own perceptions, ideas and interests during each phase of the pedagogical project. Hence, this study contributes to the topical research on the development of pedagogical practices in order to better promote a culture of participation in which all children are supported to initiate activity, and are encouraged to express their views and ideas concerning shared pedagogical activities between children and educators (see Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018; EDUFI, 2018; UN, 1989).

To summarise the results, through narrative activities, educators are able to give more dynamic space for children and show interest in issues important for children (see also Fredriksen, 2010; Juutinen, 2015; Lastikka & Karlsson, in press). Also, through storycrafted stories, it was possible to create an open atmosphere where there was room for equal encounters and reciprocity between all children and educators (see also Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019). Similar to other narrative activities, Storycrafting is a verbal activity where children reflect on what has happened and is happening. Our results show that a child's personal activity only occurs when educators are prepared to accept the children's own ways of expressing and telling about themselves (see also Fredriksen, 2010). This study allowed educators to use their expertise in everyday listening in new ways in order to promote the views and experiences of young children, but at the same time not to exploit these views and experiences (see also Clark, 2005; Clark & Statham, 2005).

In addition to Storycrafting and other narrative activities, our study shows that project-based practices created on the basis of narratives support considerably children's opportunities to participate in the planning, implementation and evaluation of activities (see also Jenkins, 2009; Kirby, 2020; Kokotsaki, 2016). Project-based practices are not familiar to all children, so children should be given time to get acquainted with a new kind of operational culture. Some children also need to anticipate future events, so educators need to be able to verbalise and support children's ability to anticipate future events through visual support and other alternative communication (see also Meadan et al., 2011). This in turn requires a strong pedagogical approach from educators.

Project-based practices reflect the child's perspective narrative activities during which educators are genuinely interested in children's views and their meanings and are willing to change the practices involving children's initiatives (see also Fredriksen, 2010; Kangas & Lastikka, 2019). Therefore, it is important that educators share their everyday life also on an emotional level (see also Katsiada, 2018; Singer et al., 2013). We argue that the change in practices permits educators, besides setting boundaries, to act as active agents, players and listeners, which helped to strengthen confidence among children and educators (see also Kirby, 2020; Kokotsaki, 2016). As Bruner (1991) explains, narratives are a way to structure the surrounding world and to reflect experiences and interactions of activities. Based on the results of this study, it is obvious that genuine encounters do not arise in situations between children and educators if the educator does not genuinely share power and presence with the children. This change of power relations enables reciprocal interaction (see also Graue & Walsh, 1998; Jenkins, 2009). Reciprocal interaction contributes to children's development of a sense of security and competence. It allows the construction of shared meaning between children and educators. Through the development of a culture of participation, it is possible to strengthen the sense of belonging and the involvement of ECEC community (see also Jenkins, 2009; Juutinen, 2015).

Enhancing a culture of participation requires educators to be aware of and consistent in action with critical elements of the development and construction and acceptance of a community-wide culture of participation (see Weckström et al., 2020). In addition, it must be seen that the narratives generated by children and educators have been created at the time, in the place and by the people present during that specific moment of narrative (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008). The pedagogical activities carried out in this study by children and educators together cannot be generalised as such to another group of children, because the activities are the ones that have arisen from the interests of children of that particular group. Educators cannot predetermine these, but they should be

individually identified for each group of children. However, it can be brought forward that leading thinkers and methodologists have long acknowledged that generalisations can never be made with certainty (Polit & Beck, 2010). In this study, we have offered a thick and detailed description of the study, the context and the situations enabling the readers to assess the credibility (see Shenton, 2004).

In the future, we would like to study the material collected for this study in even more detail and also involve the children. It would be interesting to have discussions with the children, who are now in primary school, about their logbooks, videos of activities and the diary of Sylvi the boat dog in order to know what kind of memories the children have of these and what meanings they would give to their experiences now. We conclude this paper by arguing that children and educators are willing to commit themselves to long-lasting pedagogical projects, which have been designed and performed together. Children enjoy shared activities with educators and want to share ideas and initiatives with others. This, in turn, affects their opportunities to influence pedagogical activities in an ECEC centre. For educators, this kind of reciprocal working method is rewarding and inspiring, as they see that activities engage children and pedagogical targets can be implemented in a way that motivates children.

## Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without the children and educators who offered us insights on their everyday life and work in the ECEC centre. We are grateful to all of you who gave your time and thoughts for our research. This work was supported by the Research Foundation of the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare sr. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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